Ten years after the riots that hit France in 2005, there has been much debate about how far France has moved on from the images of burning cars, disaffected youth and urban apocalypse.

At the time, the riots were presented as a sign of France's malaise, illustrating the plight of marginalised communities in the country's neglected suburbs. Much of the recent assessment has concluded that not a lot has changed, with such marginalisation now linked to some cases of radicalisation in the aftermath of the Paris Attacks on November 13.

What is easily forgotten is that the 2005 riots were part of a broader debate about how France remembers and teaches children about its colonial legacy that has since sparked a re-writing of French history textbooks.

The culmination of this debate on "colonial memory" was a fierce backlash in 2005 against a new law to "show the nation's recognition to the national contribution of France's repatriate population", more commonly known as the law on the memory of colonialism.

The law represented France's convoluted relationship with its colonial past. It was the result of forceful lobbying by groups of *pieds-noirs*, around a million former settlers from North Africa who had left Algeria – often unwillingly – after the country gained independence in 1962.

Since the 1970s, political *pied-noir* organisations have constantly led a "memorial struggle" in order to gain official recognition for their loss, together with a rehabilitation of the memory of the French empire.

The law was the fruition of this. It showed France's recognition of the *pied-noir* constituency through financial benefits (which the community had been receiving since the 1960s), but also through the erection of monuments and compensation for former
Organisation de l'armée secrète
, the anti-decolonisation terrorists who had "suffered" the effects of political exile in the 1960s.
The law went entirely unnoticed at first, but criticism mounted due to its
fourth article

, which called for school curricula to stress “the positive role of the French presence overseas” – or of French colonialism.

Chirac backed down

Pressure against the fourth article mounted over the course of a few months with historians and teachers’ unions protesting, but the backlash only gained real momentum after the riots in November. At the end of that month, the National Assembly held a session that was widely covered in the media, where centre-left deputies tried in vain to rescind the fourth article.

Politicians suddenly discussed colonial history with a sense of acrimony usually reserved for the hottest of contemporary issues. The press fawned over a “balance sheet” of France’s colonial empire and its legacies of contemporary racism and discrimination. The biggest change this implied was the understanding that the memory of colonialism had political relevance in today’s society.

Ultimately, then-president, Jacques Chirac, chose to silence the debate and the embarrassment it was causing the conservative government. In a highly controversial move, at the end of January 2006, he ordered the Constitutional Council to bypass parliament and rescind the law’s fourth article.

More than anything before, this debate illuminated the status of colonial history in French schools. In the 1960s, France’s colonial history was presented in sepia-tinted colours. France’s colonial past had been present in school curricula since the 1980s, but heavily marginalised.

In the early 2000s, a team of researchers from Versailles conducted an extensive survey about how “sensitive subjects” were taught in schools . They came to the conclusion that teachers were not equipped with the knowledge needed to teach subjects such as the Algerian War and therefore preferred to avoid them.

Textbooks updated

Soon after the 2005 controversies, the French government began looking into updating school curricula to include a larger emphasis on colonial history. Since then, historians, teachers and political associations have made headway towards improving the way schools approached

colonial history.

The big change occurred in 2011 with the publication of a new batch of schoolbooks focused on the Algerian War and the slave trade. Today, the programme of the final year of the lycée – French secondary school – even contains an obligatory module on the "Memory of the Algerian War".

The issue of schoolbooks – and of history programmes – has been so charged because of the school's traditional role as the place where French Republican identities are formed. But the inclusion of France's colonial past into history curricula has not resulted in a new and inclusive national story that has resolved the underlying issues of discrimination and racism that have only increased since the riots.

To some extent, this owes much to problems of implementation. Recent surveys conducted for the newly established Museum of Immigration show that teachers still struggle with the new history programmes. Particularly in racially diverse classes of the banlieues, or French suburbs, even the most well-meaning teachers often feel they lack the tools to convey France's history of colonial violence to the descendants of its victims.

Ultimately, curricula that take a critical view of history are just a first step in the creation of a truly inclusive society in France. After all, these same schoolchildren will eventually graduate into a society where an acrimonious debate on the memory of colonialism has not changed racial prejudice and discrimination.

Itay Lotem receives funding from Queen Mary University of London for a PhD. He is a member of the Labour Party.

Read more http://theconversation.com/a-decade-after-the-riots-france-has-rewritten-its-colonial-history-50499